ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE, FROM BIRTH

Delegated suffrage for minors, endogenous extinction and intergenerational sustainability

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“Delegated voting does not grant parents a privilege: it removes a zero applied to children.”

Abstract

Contemporary democracies proclaim the principle of political equality, yet systematically exclude part of the people who make up the community: minors. A child is subject to the law, uses public services, will inherit debt and infrastructure, and will live with the consequences of decisions taken today for longer than most adults; electorally, however, that child’s weight is exactly zero. This paper defends a separation between political entitlement and capacity to exercise it: the vote may belong to a person from birth and be exercised temporarily, in a fiduciary capacity, by that person’s legal representatives until full electoral capacity is acquired. The proposal, known in the literature as Demeny voting or parental proxy voting, is not intended to reward parenthood, but to represent people who already exist. The paper connects this reform to a second problem: persistently low fertility and the possibility of endogenous extinction, that is, a trajectory of disappearance generated by the internal functioning of society rather than by an external shock. It also distinguishes a third causal category, exo-endogenous or mixed extinction, in which a cause generated by society itself ultimately acts as a destructive shock upon that same society. It further distinguishes between emergent endogenous extinction, involuntary endogenous extinction and, only in a restricted sense, voluntary endogenous extinction. The concepts of Generations to Extinction (GTE) and Years to Extinction (YTE) are also recovered as conditional stress tests of the pace of demographic contraction. The thesis is that an ageing democracy may contain a temporal bias: present interests are fully represented, whereas the interests of minors and future generations are represented little or not at all. In this context, delegated suffrage for minors can be understood as a correction of intergenerational representation.

Keywords: delegated suffrage; Demeny voting; minors; political representation; endogenous extinction; exogenous extinction; exo-endogenous extinction; mixed extinction; perverse incentives; Generations to Extinction; Years to Extinction; demographic sustainability; intergenerational justice.

1. Democracy's blind spot

The modern democratic principle is usually summarized in a formula of extraordinary simplicity: one person, one vote. But this formula does not exactly describe existing systems. In practice, the rule is closer to: one adult person, one vote; one minor, zero votes.

The difference seems intuitive because a young child does not yet have the capacity required to form an autonomous electoral preference and exercise the franchise. Yet a limitation of capacity does not necessarily imply an absence of entitlement. Law constantly separates these two dimensions: a minor may be an owner, an heir, or the holder of legally protected interests even when a representative acts on the minor's behalf.

> ***The strongest question is not "why give parents more votes?", but "why should a person have zero political representation during the first years of life?"***

This reformulation changes the nature of the proposal. The additional vote appearing within the household does not conceptually belong to the father or the mother: it belongs to the child. The parent merely exercises it while the minor cannot do so personally.

2. Entitlement to the vote and capacity to exercise it

The proposal can be formulated through a simple principle: every person has one vote from birth; while they lack the electoral capacity to exercise it directly, their legal representative exercises it in a fiduciary capacity: this is true full democratic equality.

This keeps the political unit in the individual, not the family. The point is not to establish that "having children gives votes", but that "having persons under representation entails temporarily exercising those persons' votes". The increase in parents' electoral power is an instrumental consequence of representing more individuals, not the normative foundation of the reform.

3. Demeny voting: an idea with an academic genealogy

The proposal is commonly known as Demeny voting or parental proxy voting. Paul Demeny put it forward in 1986 within the debate on pronatalist policies in low-fertility countries. The basic intuition was that children should not remain politically voiceless throughout the entire period before adulthood and that parents could act as temporary representatives. Subsequent literature has analysed the potential effects of this institution on budget allocation, future-oriented investment, welfare and fertility.

The value of this genealogy is not to turn the argument into a simple appeal to authority, but to show that the idea is compatible with classic problems in democratic theory: who belongs to the demos, how the interests of people without full capacity are represented, and how intergenerational biases can be corrected.

4. Sustainability: not only resources, but continuity

The problem takes on a special dimension in societies with fertility persistently below replacement level. In 2024, the total fertility rate in the European Union was 1.34 children per woman and Spain's was 1.10, according to Eurostat. In Catalonia, provisional 2025 data place fertility at around 1.08 children per woman.

Sustainability is usually conceived in ecological, fiscal or energy terms. But a society is not fully sustainable if it protects its resources while indefinitely maintaining a reproductive pattern that geometrically reduces the number of members in each generation. Beyond a certain point, sustainability also means continuity.

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complete sustainability = material sustainability + demographic sustainability
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5. Exogenous, endogenous and exo-endogenous extinction

Not all extinction trajectories have the same causal nature. The useful distinction is not only between exogenous and endogenous extinction. Between them lies a third possibility: exo-endogenous or mixed extinction, in which the originating factor is generated within society or the species itself, but later acquires causal autonomy or manifests itself as a shock returning upon it from outside its ordinary demographic functioning.

Type	Dominant mechanism	Examples / logic
Exogenous extinction	An external shock destroys a population that, in the absence of the shock, could have continued.	Meteorite, major flood, catastrophic eruption, devastating epidemic, war of extermination, external destruction of habitat.
Exo-endogenous extinction (mixed)	A risk generated endogenously by society or by the species acquires causal autonomy, is partly externalized, or returns as a destructive shock upon the system that created it.	Ultra-advanced AI out of control; anthropogenic viruses; anthropogenic climate change when it triggers systemic shocks capable of compromising population continuity.
Endogenous extinction	The internal dynamics of society sustain reproduction insufficient for self-replacement.	Persistently low fertility, incentives against reproduction, delayed family formation, high private costs and failure of intergenerational coordination.

The causal scheme of exogenous extinction is: viable population → external shock → collapse. Endogenous extinction follows a different scheme: ordinary functioning of society → reproduction persistently below replacement → generational contraction → eventual disappearance. In exo-endogenous extinction, by contrast, the process is hybrid: society → creation or amplification of a risk → partially externalized or autonomized risk → returning shock → collapse or extinction.

> ***Endogenous extinction needs no meteorite: a society can appear to function normally while mathematically producing its own contraction.***

6. Is it really voluntary extinction?

The expression “voluntary extinction” is powerful but needs precision. In free societies, many reproductive decisions are voluntary at the individual level: having children, postponing them, limiting their number, or having none. But the fact that individual decisions are voluntary does not mean that the collective outcome—the gradual disappearance of the population—is intended.

In fact, the situation may be exactly the opposite. Almost nobody adopts “I want my society to become extinct” as a personal objective. The decisions are far more ordinary: now is not the right time; housing is too expensive; a second child is difficult to reconcile with work; there is no job stability; perhaps later. The aggregate result may be fertility far below replacement without any actor intending the final outcome.

For this reason, endogenous extinction should be the main concept used to describe persistently low fertility, while “voluntary” should be reserved for a restricted case. If we broaden the paper’s general causal classification, we can distinguish at least five analytical modalities:

- Exogenous extinction: caused by a dominant external shock.
- Exo-endogenous or mixed extinction: the risk originates in human action or in the functioning of society itself, but becomes a partly autonomized shock that returns upon it; for example, ultra-advanced AI out of control, anthropogenic viruses, or anthropogenic climate change with extreme consequences.
- Involuntary endogenous extinction: institutions prevent part of the population from having the children they would like to have.
- Emergent endogenous extinction: the outcome is sought by no one, but emerges from individual decisions and internal incentives.
- Voluntary endogenous extinction: a limiting case in which reproductive decline would genuinely reflect a collective preference not to continue.

Contemporary European societies appear to fit the involuntary endogenous and emergent endogenous categories much better than voluntary extinction in the strong sense.

7. Perverse incentives and the failure of intergenerational coordination

Low fertility can be interpreted as a collective-action problem. A decision can be rational for the individual while simultaneously contributing to an aggregate outcome that nobody wants. In reproduction, costs and benefits do not fall on the same actors or at the same time.

The costs of having children are largely immediate and private: time, housing, lost income, care, work-family reconciliation, education and professional risk. By contrast, part of the future benefits arising from that child’s existence are collective: the future adult will work, produce, innovate, pay taxes, maintain services and infrastructure, care for other people and contribute to sustaining common systems.

$$\textit{strongly private reproductive cost} + \textit{partly collective demographic benefit} \rightarrow \textit{risk of demographic underproduction}$$

This does not mean that each child should be treated as a fiscal instrument or that fertility should be reduced to a utilitarian calculation. It means that institutions can generate perverse incentives: making individually difficult what is collectively necessary for continuity.

> ***Endogenous extinction does not require a will to become extinct: it only requires that, generation after generation, it be individually easier not to reproduce society than to reproduce it.***

8. Generations to Extinction and Years to Extinction

To visualize the geometric nature of contraction, it is useful to use two conceptual indicators: Generations to Extinction (GTE) and Years to Extinction (YTE). They are not a literal prediction of the year in which the last

person will die. They are conditional stress tests: they show the implicit horizon if a given reproductive rate were maintained indefinitely in a closed population, without migration, down to a practical population threshold.

Let F be observed fertility, R the replacement fertility level, approximately 2.1, and q = F/R the approximate generational reproduction rate. If N_0 is the initial population, after g generations the equivalent population can be represented in simplified form as:

$$N_g = N_0 \cdot q^g$$

$$GTE = \ln(N_{min} / N_0) / \ln(q)$$

$$YTE = GTE \cdot L \quad \text{(where L is the average length of a generation)}$$

Because a geometric progression never mathematically reaches zero, “extinction” here means reaching an operational threshold: one person, a minimum cohort, or a reproductively non-viable population. The value of the indicator is not prophetic, but comparative and intuitive.

9. Forty generations: an illustrative example

Suppose, as an example, an initial population of eight million people and permanent fertility of 1.4 children per woman, with no migration and a replacement level of 2.1. The approximate generational rate is q = 1.4 / 2.1 = 0.667. Each new generation would, in simplified terms, be equivalent to two thirds of the previous one.

If we set the threshold at one person, the result is approximately 39.2 generations: in other words, about forty generations. With an average generation length of thirty years, YTE would be about 1,176 years.

The temporal distance may seem enormous, but this is misleading if interpreted as though nothing happens until the end. Contraction begins immediately: 100 → 67 → 44 → 30 → 20 → 13 → 9… Extinction is not only the final event; it is the trajectory of contraction.

This example is not an official demographic projection and does not incorporate future changes in fertility, mortality or migration. That is precisely why GTE and YTE should be understood as indicators of endogenous dynamics: they answer the question “what does maintaining this rate imply?”, not “what exactly will happen?”. Migration may stabilize the total population of a territory, but it does not change the specific question of replacement capacity through its own reproduction.

10. The future does not vote

The connection between demography and political representation appears here in its full force. In an ageing society, adult and older cohorts retain their full electoral weight, while younger cohorts are doubly underrepresented: they are numerically smaller and, within them, all minors have zero electoral weight.

This creates a possible temporal bias. Those who decide today are not exactly the same set of people who will bear tomorrow’s consequences for the longest time. An eighty-five-year-old citizen has a full vote on decisions whose effects may extend to the end of the century; a five-year-old child, who will probably live through a much larger share of that period, has zero votes.

This is not an accusation against older people, nor does it imply that they vote irresponsibly. It is an institutional property of the system. Democracy represents present preferences, but distributes costs and benefits over time. When future actors are underrepresented, excessive political discounting of the future may arise.

Perhaps low-fertility societies have not decided to become extinct. Perhaps they have built institutions in which the incentives of the present are far better represented than the interests of the future.

11. Do parents think more about the future?

There is an additional argument, but it should remain secondary: having descendants may plausibly lengthen the time horizon of some decisions. A parent may internalize part of the future of their children and therefore give greater weight to education, institutional stability, housing, public debt or long-term investment.

But this argument is empirical, not normative. Not all parents are more farsighted, nor are people without children less responsible. The main foundation of delegated suffrage should therefore not be that parents are morally superior, but something simpler: the minor exists, is affected by collective decisions, and currently counts as zero electorally.

12. The objection of those who cannot have children

An understandable objection says: “I would like to have children but I cannot afford to; why should another person who does have them enjoy more political power than I do?” The answer requires separating the parent from the minor. The childless person keeps exactly the same vote. The parent does not receive an additional vote as a reward. The additional vote belongs to a third person: the child.

The fact that another person has been unable to have children cannot justify giving children who do exist zero political representation. And if economic constraints prevent people from having the children they want, this reinforces the diagnosis of adverse endogenous incentives: it is not a reason to underrepresent existing children, but a reason to revise institutions that turn desired reproduction into a disproportionate burden.

13. A concrete institutional rule: mother-father alternation

If the vote is truly to belong to the minor, its indivisibility should be preserved. A practical solution is to establish a default alternation rule where two parents have equal legal representation. By default, the first child would be represented electorally by the mother; the second by the father; the third by the mother; the fourth by the father; and so on.

Family composition	Votes exercised by the mother	Votes exercised by the father	Total persons / votes
2 parents + 1 child	2 (own + 1st child)	1	3
2 parents + 2 children	2	2 (own + 2nd child)	4
2 parents + 3 children	3 (own + 1st + 3rd child)	2	5
2 parents + 4 children	3	3 (own + 2nd + 4th child)	6

This rule has four virtues: each minor retains one complete and indivisible vote; the parents do not need to agree jointly on how the vote is cast; it prevents one person from automatically concentrating all the children’s votes; and the Administration has a predetermined criterion when there is no agreement.

In single-parent families, or where only one person holds legal representation, that person would exercise the votes of the minors represented. Situations involving guardianship, care arrangements, complex custody or

conflicts of interest would require specific regulation. The mother-father-mother-father rule should be understood as a simple default option, not as a claim of political superiority of one sex over the other. Parents could also be allowed to agree on a different allocation, provided that each child's vote is clearly assigned to a single representative.

14. One person, one vote: objection or foundation?

At first sight, delegated suffrage appears contrary to the principle of "one person, one vote". But it can also be defended precisely as a radicalization of that principle. A household with two adults and two children contains four people. The current system turns four people into two votes. The proposed system would preserve four people and four votes, even if two were temporarily exercised by proxy.

The real controversy, therefore, is not whether each person generates one vote, but whether a personal political right can be exercised temporarily by a representative. This is a serious legal and philosophical question, but it is different from the accusation of "double votes for parents".

15. Representing interests is not guessing preferences

A two-year-old child has no formed preference on pensions, public debt or education policy. But the child does have interests: that society functions when they become an adult, that they receive an education, that they do not inherit insolvent institutions, that the territory remains habitable, and that present decisions do not irresponsibly consume future resources.

Delegated voting does not ask the parent to guess which party the child will vote for at age thirty. It asks the parent to exercise fiduciary judgment over the represented person's present and future interests. This is imperfect representation, as many forms of legal representation are. But the current alternative is not perfect representation either: it is no representation.

16. A demographic reform or a democratic reform?

Delegated suffrage could have pronatalist effects, increase the political weight of families, or favour spending oriented toward childhood and the future. Economic literature has modelled some of these channels. But these effects are contingent and should not be the exclusive foundation of the reform.

The more robust justification is democratic: representing people who are already part of the community. The reform is pronatalist only indirectly; directly, it is a reform of the architecture of the demos. The central question is whether universal suffrage should mean universal adult suffrage or universal representation of all living persons.

universal adult suffrage: all adults vote

universal human suffrage: all persons are represented; when they can, they vote directly

17. The limit: the unborn remain unrepresented

Delegated suffrage does not solve the whole problem of intergenerational justice. People who have not yet been born still lack direct representation. But it considerably reduces the temporal gap: instead of elections representing only the adult population, they would represent all living persons.

This is especially relevant because many political costs have horizons longer than a legislative term: debt, infrastructure, urban planning, education, energy, climate or pensions. Incorporating minors into the demos does not represent the entire future, but it expands the political present to the limits of the existing population.

18. Conclusion: democratic equality and the future

The possibility of endogenous extinction requires us to think about demography differently. A society can disappear without invasion, without a meteorite and without an external catastrophe. It can do so through its ordinary functioning, when individual decisions, private costs and institutional incentives produce fertility insufficient for replacement.

This extinction need not be voluntary in the strong sense: it may be emergent, involuntary and contrary to family preferences. Nobody needs to want the outcome. The causal classification must distinguish between exogenous, endogenous and exo-endogenous or mixed extinction; “voluntary” is only a possible subcategory of some endogenous processes.

At the same time, low fertility ages the demos. Adults and older people retain all their electoral power, while children—who will live for longer under present decisions—have zero weight. This asymmetry can reinforce political discounting of the future and contribute to a vicious circle in which the present is far better represented than the future.

> One person, one vote, from birth. While a person cannot exercise it personally, their legal representative exercises it in a fiduciary capacity: this is true full democratic equality.

This rule does not turn children into an electoral reward. It does exactly the opposite: it prevents a person from disappearing from the political count merely because they have not yet reached the age of personal exercise. The proposal can be debated, corrected and institutionally refined, but it forces us to confront a question that ageing democracies will not be able to postpone indefinitely: if the future depends on children, why do children not count?

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